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Glimpses

Mormon Abstract

by Stephanie K. Northrup

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When you think of Mormons “pushing the envelope,” what comes to mind? Deacons at the door collecting fast offerings? Try Bethanne Andersen’s *The Last Supper (Place Setting)*. Many beautiful renditions of the Last Supper already exist, telling the story through dramatic lighting, facial expressions, and body language. Andersen tries a new perspective. She paints the dishes from which Christ eats His last mortal meal. That’s it. No people. Just us – invited to put ourselves in His shoes. The dishes are painted in soft pastel, as if on the verge of fading. This is a fleeting moment, like mortality, as He sits with His friends before making the ultimate sacrifice. By pushing the envelope, by throwing a new image at us that makes us consider the story in a new way, Andersen invites viewer participation. What a great approach to “likening the scriptures.”

While Greg Olsen, Del Parson, and Simon Dewey are household names, ask most Mormons to name an abstract artist in the Church and you’ll probably get blank stares. Do Mormons make abstract art? We do. And we have been for a long time.

In 1890, the church sent John Hafen and other “art missionaries” to Paris. Their assignment was to improve their skill so that they could create art for the Salt Lake Temple. What did these artists return with? Impressionism! Bright, thick brush strokes replaced traditional refined detail. This was a time when Impressionism was just becoming accepted – though many people still found it too “unfinished” looking. “It is not the mission of art to ape or imitate,” wrote Hafen. “Cease to look for mechanical effect or minute finish, for individual blades of grass...but look for smell, for soul, for feeling, for the beautiful.”^[ii] A long tradition of impressionist artwork followed as many LDS artists either studied in Paris or were taught in Utah by those who had. ^[iii]

As the impressionists deliberately moved away from realism the doorway was opened for the Fauvists and Cubists and other forms of abstraction. Mormon Cubists from that time period appear to be scarce to nonexistent, although some contemporary LDS works, such as Sallie Suzan Poet’s *O Jerusalem*, from the recent LDS International Art Competition, appear to be Cubist-inspired. When people think “abstract” it’s usually Picasso who comes to mind, though if there was a Mormon Picasso, no one knows about him. That’s all right, because in abstract art one goal is to be unique – say it in a new way, not simply imitate. As modern art began to inspire the creation of many new schools of art, a desire grew among many LDS artists to create a Mormon school of art, art unique to Mormonism.





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Minerva Teichert is among those who sought to create “a style distinctly our own.”^[v] Teichert was commissioned to paint for temples and traded much of her work to Brigham Young University as tuition for her children. Her painting of Esther is in the Gospel Art Picture Kit and many of her works have been spotlighted in the Ensign, making her one of the better known artists in the church. Teichert desired to tell the “great Mormon story.” While the impressionists omit detail to emphasize feeling, Teichert omits detail to emphasize the story being told. Many of her paintings have an “unfinished” look as a result.

The church began to build temples without murals and thus one of the major motivations for LDS artists disappeared. However, after 1950, Brigham Young University became a stronger influence, producing many more artists in search of a uniquely Mormon style. Alexander B. Darais pioneered contemporary Latter-day Saint art as he taught at BYU. In his [Staff Among Spears](#), one shepherd's staff stands among the Roman spear's at the Savior's crucifixion. No people hold the spears, and only half a face can be seen below the shepherd's staff, creating a feeling of isolation. His form rises above all as He fulfills His mission. The painting gives us a sense of Christ's determination to fulfill His divine responsibilities as Shepherd and Savior despite the loneliness and suffering he endured.



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Abstract art is well equipped to handle certain challenges. Consider this one: Paint a picture of faith. Many moving works have depicted faithful people. But faith is an abstract idea. M. Clane Graves, who attended BYU in the 1960s and was chairman of the Design Department in 1980, chose to depict faith through abstract symbols in his *The Fourth Article of Faith*. Four combinations of shapes depict faith, repentance, baptism, and the gift of the Holy Ghost. Graves said the painting “is simply a private and personal quest to come to an increased level of faith in and understanding of God, the Eternal Father of us all.”^[vii] Inventing the symbols and choosing their placement and colors is almost like keeping a scripture journal of sorts. Viewers are allowed to ponder the artist's choices to discover the meaning he placed there, or add their own insight to the interpretation. As with the parables, you can take the image at face value or dig a little and learn something more.





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If Graves paints in parables, Wulf Barsch paints Isaiah! Palm and poplar trees, Greek letters, pyramids and rainbows put together in stunning compositions. Hugh Nibley wrote, "In Wulf Barsch's paintings there is a sense of deep concern, an ominous and brooding feeling of admonition and warning. This I find disquieting until I remember that is exactly the effect the reading of the Scriptures has on me...."[ix] Even without reading about the meanings behind the symbols, when I view a Wulf Barsch painting I am moved by the beauty of the textures, shapes and colors. Barsch also taught at BYU, and encouraged explicitly gospel-themed art. BYU, the Church's International Art Competitions, art in the new temples, and interesting illustrations in Church magazines all encourage artists of the Church to keep creating. As the Church has grown to have more members outside the United States than within, the variety in training and experience has continued to increase and the diversity of styles has continued to increase.

So now we have Todd Chilton with his bright geometric patterns, Jacqui Larsen with her poetic collages, Brian Kershishnik with his quirky flying and dancing people, David Linn with his fantastic wastelands, and Cassandra Christensen Barney with her whimsical heroines. I keep discovering new people doing new and exciting things.

When I look at the art of the saints in the latest International Art Competition, I do not see one school or style with a specific method or color pallet or paint application. I cannot tell you what Mormon art looks like in the way that I can describe the Cubists or the Impressionists. I do see artists that love the gospel and express that love in their own way.

With my own abstract paintings, my hope is to create visual intrigue but also to express things of importance to me. Sometimes I think of something I want to say and I imagine a picture that might help me say it. More often, however, the picture finds me when I'm reading my scriptures or pondering a blessing or trial. An image forms in my head; I'll jot it down in a sketchbook; and then I'll think about colors, shapes, and textures that help create focus, express emotion, or tell the story.



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Often my paintings use line to represent connections to family, humanity, or Christ. In *Come and Return*, the many lines draw the viewers' eyes through the temples repeatedly, inviting all to attend the House of the Lord often. In *Where the Veil is Thin* the lines represent our connection to the departed and to the Savior through temple work. In *Writer's Inspiration* many lines show the writer being influenced by everything around her, but the main inspiration line comes from heaven and runs through her eyes, mind, heart, arm, and out the hand to the pen and paper.

The people in my paintings are often faceless, freeing viewers to insert themselves, their loved ones, or their concept of the Savior, into the picture. I tend to change colors with each face or hand I paint because I find the variety of colors we come in to be so beautiful; it's a purely aesthetic choice.

I love abstraction because it invites participation from the viewer. It was thrilling when I posted a picture of my painting *Rock of My Salvation* online and a friend found even more symbolism than I had intended while creating it. After describing all that she had discovered she concluded with the exclamation "a work of art I needed to see this week. Thank you for sharing!" I hope that as

exclamation, a work of art I needed to see this week. Thank you for sharing! I hope that as strangers, friends, and my own children view my pictures they will be given new perspective and bring something of their life experience to the picture that makes it meaningful to them.

We live in age when you can Google "LDS Art" and quickly expose yourself to a great variety of work. An age where you can access a style that speaks to you, be it Teichert or Darais, Dewey or Barsch, Christensen or Everett. We live in a time when definitions of art are expanding. The gutsy impressionists of the 1800s are considered quite conservative now. So the artists of our faith are free to express that faith in any way they can imagine. How will they push that envelope next?

[i] The Last Supper (Place Setting), Bethanne Andersen, 1982, Pastel on paper, 22" x 30"

[ii] Images of Faith: Art of the Latter-day Saints, Museum of Church History and Art, Deseret Book, p.46

[iii] Ibid, p. 41

[iv] Christ in a Red Robe, Minerva Teichert

[v] Ibid, p. 72

[vi] The Fourth Article of Faith, M. Clane Graves, about 1975, Acrylic on canvas, 60" x 79"

[vii] Ibid, p. 133

[viii] Pleiades, Wulf Barsch, Oil on canvas, 60" x 54"

[ix] Ibid, p. 153

[x] Writer's Inspiration, Stephanie K. Northrup, Oil on Canvas, 20" x 24"